

May 6 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1998

Towns sprang up with the names from the ancient Mediterranean world, names like Utica, Troy, or the Vice President's hometown, Carthage. Artists portrayed America's leaders wearing togas, as the bust of George Washington in the hall demonstrates. Thankfully, that is a tradition we have left to the 19th century. [Laughter]

In the 19th and 20th centuries, our Republic turned into a bustling nation, thanks in no small measure to Italian-Americans. Ancient Rome was replaced by young Italy in the American imagination. And democracy was given new life by heroes like Mazzini and Garibaldi.

America's growing cities attracted millions of Italians, eager to build a new life in a new world. They worked hard. They prospered. Today American Italians, or Italian-Americans, are leaders in every enterprise conducted in our Nation. And as we all know, it is impossible to walk more than a few blocks in any American city without hearing the words "caffè latte." [Laughter]

The people here in this room tonight are the link between our two countries, between two cultures that have nourished each other since America was just an idea. From our highest courts to our finest tables, from our playing fields to our silver screen, from one side of the aisle in Congress to the other, Italian-Americans have graced our Nation with their intellect, their industry, their good will, and above all, a contagious love of life.

Mr. Prime Minister, you have accomplished so much in your time in office. You have presided over a string of economic successes. And Americans especially admire your perseverance in leading Italy toward European monetary union. Without Italy, Europe is not Europe. And without Europe, the world would be a poorer, less free, and much duller place.

Italy has been a force for peace and security in its region, on the Continent, around the world, in Albania, in Bosnia, and in Kosovo, where we're working hard together to bring about a peaceful resolution. America is proud to know you as a partner and an ally, and we are grateful for your provision of our military bases, sent to help maintain Europe's hard-won peace.

Mr. Prime Minister, we take pride in our strong friendship. We know it will continue to grow stronger as we enter the new millennium, a word that brings us, once again, back to Rome. For just as the *Pax Romana* spread far and wide through the ancient world, we hope and work for the peace of a new millennium that will allow more people than ever before to live their dreams in security.

If we can achieve a peace of the millennium, then the ancient dream of Columbus to explore new places can be lived by more people than ever—new places in outer space, in biotechnology and medical research, in the hearts and minds of people around the world who still look to Italy and America for confirmation that a good society can be created from many parts.

E pluribus unum, the motto of the United States, a principle cherished by Italians and Americans: Out of many, one. Mr. Prime Minister, let us make it so.

Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to join me in a toast to the Prime Minister and Mrs. Prodi and the people of Italy.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:30 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to the Prime Minister's wife, Flavia Prodi. The transcript made available by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Prime Minister Prodi.

Remarks to the Mayors Conference on Public Schools

May 7, 1998

Thank you very much. Mr. Mayor, Secretary Riley, thank you for your outstanding work. I'd like to thank Attorney General Reno and Secretary Slater, Secretary Herman, Secretary Glickman for also coming, along with James Lee

Witt, our FEMA Director. I'd like to thank Mickey Ibarra and Lynn Cutler for the work that they do with you and all the other members of the White House staff, and say a special

word of welcome to Senator Kennedy and Congressman Martinez, about whom I'll say more in a moment.

I'm sorry if I cost Mayor Helmke any votes in the Republican primary. *[Laughter]* It is his great misfortune to have been my friend for a long time. But surely, whatever he lost he got back by outing me as a law school truant today. *[Laughter]* I hope he has recovered all that lost ground. Unfortunately, it's true. *[Laughter]*

Because this is my only opportunity to appear before the press today, before I get into my remarks about education I would like to make a few important comments about the peace process in the Middle East.

First, I think it's important in the temporary frustration of the moment not to forget what Israelis and Palestinians have accomplished in just the past few years: the peace agreement signed here in September of 1993, based on the Oslo accords, the agreement over Hebron, continuing in very open dialog, an unprecedented amount of security cooperation. What we are trying to do now is simply to regain the momentum that has been lost in the past few months, not by imposing our ideas on anyone, because only the parties can make decisions that will affect the lives they have to live, their security, and their future.

What we're searching for is common ground to achieve what Prime Minister Netanyahu asked us to pursue a year ago, the start of accelerated permanent status negotiations. It's important not to forget that. We are not talking about a final agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis. What we're talking about is what kind of agreement can they make within the framework of their previous agreements that will get them into discussing all the difficult issues that would allow them to wrap this up, hopefully on time by the end of May next year, which was the timetable established in the Oslo accords.

Secretary Albright, I believe, made some real progress in London. Both Prime Minister Netanyahu and Chairman Arafat were seriously constructive. They discussed a set of ideas that we believe are necessary to get into those final status talks.

Prime Minister Netanyahu has asked us to send our Special Envoy, Dennis Ross, back to the region to pursue creative ways to make our ideas acceptable to both sides. He leaves later

today with my instruction to literally go the extra mile, to seize this opportunity for peace, to launch the final status talks.

The Prime Minister and I agreed to try to do this a year ago, and we're going to do our best. I do not want to minimize the difficulties. Both sides have to make very hard decisions if we're going to keep moving forward. But the prize is a just and lasting and secure peace, and the prize can be attained. We're going to do everything we can to make it a reality.

Now, let me say what I said to you before when I was asked to appear before this conference. I applaud the mayors for holding this meeting on education. You have done an enormous service to the county by being here and by putting this document out. You can lead the way to a revolution of high standards and high expectations, of genuine accountability and real choice in education. And I believe you are determined to do so.

In the past few years, a lot has been done by dedicated teachers, fine principals, supportive parents, other committed reformers, and our students. But all of us know we have a lot more to do. We know that we have the world's best system of higher education, and we've taken unprecedented steps to open the doors of college to all Americans. We're moving forward on other levels, as well.

Tuesday, the United States Senate passed, 91 to 7, a bill that articulates the principles that I set out 5 years ago in my proposed "GI bill" for America's workers. I think all educators know that we have to create a system of lifetime learning in America. Everybody has got to be able to go back to school throughout their lifetime. Indeed, one of the most important provisions in the balanced budget was that which provided a HOPE scholarship tax credit of \$1,500 a year for first 2 years of college and continuing tax credits for other forms of education for people of any age when they have to go back to school.

What this "GI bill" will do, this present legislation that the Senate passed, is to untangle and streamline the current large number of Government programs on job training so that workers can get a simple skill grant to choose the training they need. That is very important.

But everyone knows we still have a lot of work to do in our public schools. Our public schools, for generations, have taught our children not only how to read and write but what

it means to be an American. And they have embodied the principle that everyone ought to have a fair and equal chance to live out their dreams. We know we have to strengthen them to do their job for the 21st century. As I said, there is a lot to be proud of. It's important to remember—and I think the evidence will show—that since the issuance of the "Nation At Risk" report in 1983, dedicated teachers, visionary principals, committed students, and involved parents have accomplished a lot. But a lot needs to be done.

Our schools are still not giving our children, particularly our children who come in from the most difficult circumstances that Mayor Helmke discussed, the best education in the world. And therefore, I really thank you for this action plan. It reflects the lessons that have been learned in communities across America. It reflects the goals I have sought to advance, that Secretary Riley has worked his heart out on for more than 5 years now.

And I think it's worth mentioning what they are. Every child in every community must master the basics with national standards in reading and math. Every child must have the chance to learn in small classes, especially in the early grades. That's why I proposed a national effort to hire 100,000 more teachers and distribute them in a way that will enable us to get average class size down to 18 in the first 3 grades. Every child should have more public school choice and the opportunity to learn in a modern, safe, state-of-the-art school. No child in any community, in my opinion, should be passed from grade to grade, year after year, without mastering the material. I believe that those things are principles that, if they were real in every school in America, would strengthen education dramatically.

I've often said, based on my own personal experience, that there's no education problem anywhere in America that hasn't been solved by somebody somewhere in America. We have to do more, all of us, to shine a spotlight on reforms that work at the local level and then to encourage people to embrace other people's changes.

You know, our Founding Fathers set up the States as laboratories of democracy. That was the phrase used by James Madison and by other Founders. And in so many ways, they are. I used to say, when I was a Governor, I was much more proud of being the second State

to do something than to be the first State to do something, because if we were the second State to do something, it meant we were paying attention to the laboratories and we weren't embarrassed to take somebody else's good idea if it would help our people. I think today, more than any other single group of people, the mayors embody that spirit.

And this report that Secretary Riley is issuing today called "Turning Around Low Performing Schools," shows that, number one, it can be done and shows what is done. Let me just show it to you; Dick just gave me a copy of it before I came in. I hope this will be read by every mayor, every Governor, every school superintendent in the entire United States of America. If nothing else, it will give people the courage to know that no matter how difficult their problems are, things can get better, much better. And I hope that others will be as unashamed as I was when I was a Governor to take other people's ideas. It's okay to give them credit, but the main thing you need to do is to take them.

When parents and teachers take responsibility, asking more of themselves, their children, and their leaders, you can replace triumph—you can replace failure with triumph. That's what this report shows. It shows that no school is a lost cause and that no child is a lost cause.

A lot of you have been kind and generous and openminded enough basically to embrace and elevate the remarkable experiment launched by Mayor Daley in Chicago. They looked at their schools; they saw low test scores, high dropout rates, students literally earning diplomas who couldn't read them. But instead of walking away, they went to work. Chicago ended social promotion, but Chicago also gave more after-school opportunities, had mandatory summer school for children who did not pass from grade to grade. And we now see, in addition to a lot of other changes, including far more involvement by parents, school by school, we now see high standards and uncompromising excellence coming back into the classrooms of that city. And I have been in the Chicago schools, I believe, three times in the last couple of years—I was just there recently—and it is truly amazing.

The thing that has moved me most, I think, was we were at a school—not the last time, Mayor, but the time before last—in which there

were lots of parents there who had clearly rejected the notion that the worst thing for their child's self-esteem was being forced to go to summer school or forced to repeat a grade. They understood that by the time they were 30 years old, if they couldn't fill out a job application or read it in the first place, that would do far more damage to their self-esteem than having to spend a few more months learning. And that was a terrific achievement. And I think you deserve a great deal of credit for it. And I thank you for what you've done.

I believe we have to use standards in testing to identify children who are failing to learn, to make sure they get the extra help they need. I believe that we have to say to every student that America cares about you; America believes in you whether you believe in yourself or not, right now; but it is our fundamental value in education that you must learn in order to be certified as a learner.

Let me also say, I think we have to say that it is absolutely wrong to go about this business of saying you're going to end social promotion or have testing with standards and then not do what it takes to bring the children up to speed. It would be wrong to do this without giving those after-school opportunities, without providing those tutorial opportunities, without providing those summer school opportunities.

And I want to say—I see Sandy Feldman here—I want to say that I think that the teachers of this country will lead the way on this if they believe that the kids are going to get the long-term support they need to be held to the high standards. And I think the leaders of the AFT and the NEA feel that way, and I think local teachers in every school throughout this country feel that way.

No one wants to be a part of a failing enterprise, especially when the stakes are the highest they could possibly be, the future of our children. And if you look at these two things, if you say, "Okay, we know this can be done, and everybody wants to do it," then the only remaining question is, what do we have to do and why aren't we doing it? And I see now more and more cities responding to this call: Boston, Cincinnati, Long Beach, Rochester, Washington, New York, Philadelphia are all taking steps to end social promotion. I've been in many of the schools in cities that are here in this audience represented, and I know that

there are people working to take the kind of responsibility for transforming their schools.

Now, if you're going to do that, we have a responsibility to help. As Paul said, there are some disputes about what the role of the National Government should be, as opposed to the States, as opposed to the local level. I think it's important to put on the table first that the Federal Government's role in education has always been somewhat limited. It's less than a dime on the dollar of the education money. That means that we should focus on what works, on national priorities, and on helping schools that need the most help because they have the least ability to provide for the needs of their people.

We also ought to focus on those that manifest a desire to do the right thing. If you know what works, you ought to reward that. That's why I have proposed a network of what we call education opportunity zones. Today, Senator Kennedy, Congressman Clay, and others, and Mr. Martinez—thank you for being here—will introduce legislation to create these zones all across America.

They will target poor urban and rural communities where schools are often in crisis. They will spread reforms that work. You get the benefit of these zones if you're prepared to end social promotion, impose higher standards, recognize good schools, turn around failing ones, give parents public school choice, reward outstanding teachers, help those who are having trouble, remove those who cannot make the grade, and make sure that all children get the help they need through after-school tutoring and summer school.

This bill should be supported by everyone in both parties who cares about children and who cares about turning around failing schools. It is the only way we can offer opportunity to and demand responsibility from all the children in all of our communities all across America.

I think one of the most interesting things—I asked for a report before I came out here about the cities that are working in environments where they don't have the level of direct control that the mayor enjoys in Chicago, and I got a good report on what some of you are doing in various cities. And the only thing I would say about that is that, either through a cooperative process or in some other way, in the end someone has to have the ability to make

a decision and make it stick. Someone has to have the ability to make a decision. We don't make those decisions in Washington. We can create a framework. We can create opportunities. We can give money. But in the end, if a change has to be made, there has to be someone who can make the change.

I've already said that I believe—and I strongly believe—there's enough evidence of what works that if we get the people together at the local level, you can create an environment in which that's happening. But the mayors, even if they don't directly control the schools, have to be willing to speak up and say that this is not being done if it's not being done. You are the only people who can do that. You are still the single voice of your cities.

And I have now spent hours and hours and hours looking at the Chicago experiment. I have spent no little amount of time on several other school systems, including some represented in this room. And I honestly believe that in the end, if no one can make a decision and they can always bat authority back and forth and no one can be held accountable and no one's willing to be responsible for what doesn't work as well for what does, it's going to be very tough.

So we'll do our best to push this bill. I hope you'll help us pass it. I think it will really support what you're trying to do. But you know as well as I do, that if we have a value of no social promotion, if we have a value that says every child can learn, if we're trying to propose what works, in the end someone has to be able to take responsibility for making that decision.

Now, let me say that we've got a comprehensive education agenda in the Congress, as all of you know. We're trying to get the funds to aid for school construction and school repair. Many of our cities have average age of their school buildings over 65 years. Many of our other cities have huge numbers of children going to school in trailers every day. I hope we can pass the construction bill. I hope we can pass the smaller classes.

We're doing our best to get full authorization for America Reads, to continue our work to help you hook up all the classrooms and libraries in the country to the Internet by the year 2000, to continue our struggle for national standards, including the tests in reading and math at the fourth and eighth grade.

We have made some progress on some of these issues in Congress. We may have a chance to talk about that in the question and answer period. But so far we have not been able to persuade the Congress to embrace the smaller class sizes, the modernized schools, the more teachers, the higher standards. We're going to keep working to do that. I want to ask Congress to join with the mayors across party lines to do what is right for our children in the 21st century.

You have set an example, all of you, without regard to party, who have put your children first. Just remember this: I had a meeting with the head of the Federal Reserve Board, Alan Greenspan, a couple of days ago, and he said—it was really interesting—he said, "You know, it's hard to be sure about everything that's going on in this economy, but one thing is absolutely clear. It is now being powered by ideas. We live in an economy of ideas. You have more wealth growth on less density of physical product than ever before in human history, and the trend will continue unabated. That means all the opportunities of tomorrow are those that are in the minds of our children waiting to be brought out." You recognize that, and together we have to bring them out.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:10 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Paul Helmke of Fort Wayne, IN, president, U.S. Conference of Mayors; Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu of Israel; Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; Ambassador Dennis Ross, Special Middle East Coordinator; Mayor Richard M. Daley of Chicago, IL; and Sandra Feldman, president, American Federation of Teachers.